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The Historical “Dispute of the New World.” European Historians of the United States and European History, Culture and Public Life, International Workshop

Fondazione Luigi Einaudi – Turin, September 10-11, 2015

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The Historical “Dispute of the New World.” European Historians of the United States and European History, Culture and Public Life, International Workshop

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- 1 American studies in Europe and the European historiography of the United States are in recent times two of the topics which have attracted much scholarly interest throughout the Old World. In 2014, Nicolas Barreyre, Michael Heale, Stephen Tuck and Cecile Vidal edited *Historians Across Borders: Writing American History in a Global Age*: the volume is the output of the research group “We, the People,” which gathered twenty-four scholars from eleven European countries around the topic of Americanist historiography in Europe. The main thesis of their work is that *place matters*: locational, cultural and institutional factors affect the writing of US history and have an impact on academic scholarship. In September 2015, Maurizio Vaudagna (University of Eastern Piedmont, Italy) organized the International Workshop “The Historical ‘Dispute of the New World’, European Historians of the United States and European History, Culture and Public Life” which was inspired by the idea that European historians of the US, while writing on American past, have been often influenced by personal or cultural values, issues and concerns stemming from their national European locations. As a matter of fact, most of them have not “gone American,” maintaining both their cultural and national peculiarities and their Europeanness.
- 2 Following Vaudagna’s idea, the two-day workshop sought connections between two levels of reasoning: the first aimed at identifying the peculiarities of various national (or regional) historiographical trends; the second tried to find commonalities and cleavages among various European trends.

Michael Heale (University of Lancaster) and Stephen Tuck (Oxford University), "A Special Relationship? British Historians of the United States"

- 3 The British case presented by Michael Heale and Stephen Tuck perfectly fits with the idea that *place matters*. Michael Heale explained how paradoxical the British academic circles were, especially in the 30 years after 1945: there was much suspicion about American history, but the field took off sharply anyway, for both historical and geographical reasons. The role of the US in Europe during World War II, as well as the need to rethink the British Empire, attracted the interest of scholars and students, and the United States soon stimulated this interest by generously funding academic research. As a result, most of the scholarly works published by the first generation of historians after 1945 was based on Atlantic history, fostering the idea of a *special relationship* based on Anglo-American connections. During those years, historians of the US faced the suspicions (and stuffiness) of their older colleagues with the apparent vitality and even irreverence of American society, focusing on democratic and egalitarian values. These topics soon came to the ears of the British public, especially in the so-called provincial areas, which were more sensitive to them. For this reason, universities like Manchester and Nottingham were encouraged to establish new chairs in American history. By the time this trend also involved the traditional universities, scholars were already shifting their interest to new areas of study: US historiography was guiding part of their research with topics such as gender and reform, which matched better with the needs of British society.
- 4 And so it went for the subsequent decades. Stephen Tuck focused on twentieth-first century British historians. He described how, in the first decade, they perceived – and still perceive – themselves as historians of the United States who « happened to be in Britain,» (Badger, 1992, 515) but still looked at American history to find parts of their own history. Currently, the history of the U.S is still a tool for understanding some aspects of British identity, but it is yet to be determined what are the British answers to the British questions that the new historiography of the US will find.

Philipp Gassert (University of Mannheim), "Representing the Most Significant Other. German Historians View the United States"

- 5 According to Philipp Gassert, during the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries, European historians of the United States held a common approach to the subject of their inquiry: they looked at the present and the future of their society through the lens of US history. This kind of fascination did not always take a positive perspective. First, the European interest in US history and culture was early, intense, and continuous, but the German institutional academic investment in American Studies did not follow suit, hence the growth of US historiography in Germany was at first limited. Nonetheless, such historiography has since been impressive (Dreisbach and Strupp, 2007). Second, for most of the twentieth century, American studies in Germany were highly politicized and acquired the status of an "applied science." The subject was limited (if not

impeded) especially in post-Nazi Germany, both because of the scholarship's politicization in the previous decades and the priority given to American literary studies in the context of cultural diplomacy. Third, postwar German historiography focused on German-American relations and US diplomacy, but the generational change within history departments and new institutional openings led the trends of national historiography to be better integrated with international and US historiographical debates. Consequently, the German-related focus declined. This is a general trend in Western Europe, but it is not in other European regions. Thus, Gassert argued, although not homogeneous, several national historiographies of the US share many topics such as bilateral/diplomatic/transnational relations; European perceptions of the US; migration; the South and the Civil Rights movement. For this reason, the communities of research are not nation-based but topic-based, and if location matters, it is in the professional viewpoint of the historian, rather than in his/her national belonging.

Sylvia Hilton (Complutense University, Madrid), "Writing US History in Contemporary Spain"

- 6 The Spanish case was presented by Sylvia Hilton, whose introduction focused on the variety of fields where many contributions to US historiography in Spain are produced. As in most European countries, Spanish scholars mix United States history with anthropology, early modern history, art history, political science, information sciences, economics and law. Looking at the disciplines that are commonly considered as part of American studies, she noticed a general division between historians/anthropologists and English philologists. While the first group concentrates on the connections between the US and Spain, the latter are more likely to focus on US society, culture and history *per se*. Nonetheless, these boundaries are permeable, so, Sylvia Hilton asked, what are the real boundaries of US historiography? What characteristics make an historian French or Spanish: his/her nationality; affiliation; years on the field? In one of the most important theoretical points of the discussion, she argued that historiography can reflect the values and interests of more than one specific collective identity, which is defined by such markers as, for example, local or regional birthplace, social class, profession, gender, religion and ideologies (Hilton, 2010). For this reason, it might be useful to ponder whether the physical locations of historians – defined by territorial boundaries and by the social and cultural identities which we consider to be their figurative locations – can affect historiographical perspectives.

Ivan Kurilla (European University of St. Petersburg), "Russia and the United States: Diplomacy, Technological Exchanges and Mutual Image Construction"

- 7 Talking about perspectives, the framework of Russian historiography of the US presented by Ivan Kurilla is surprisingly similar to that of other European countries: from a stage of political activism to the perception of a kind of "special relationship," from anti-Americanism to fascination and abundant funding. All these steps clearly followed the flow of the bilateral relations between the two countries. Nonetheless,

there are two main differences with most of the cases presented before. The first is timing: US funds came to Russia only in the 1990s, for about a decade. The second is institutional structure. In most Western European countries the decrease of US soft power and funding led historians and Americanists in general to find new sources and institutional assets. The less they felt pressed by political interests, the more they went "native." Conversely, in Russia, the subject gradually began to collapse. The reasons are twofold. On the one hand, the new crisis in Russian-American relations and the new rise of anti-Americanism in Russia did not lead to additional financing for studying the US from either the Russian or the US governments; on the other hand, low-quality journalism was detrimental to academic studies because the crisis in US-Russian Studies was narrated as a failure in Russians scholars' attempts to present Russia to the US, implying that the funding for research had not been put to good use. As a consequence, in the Russian case, *place matters* again, but it is a challenge.

Tvrtko Jacovina (University of Zagreb), "Where, in Hell, is America?' Yugoslav Historians on the USA: Between Migration and Selected Political Topics"

- 8 Tvrtko Jacovina presented the Croatian framework starting with a fact: there is no historian in Croatia who works on the United States only. The "parochial" way of thinking that dominates in academia does not allow historians to distance themselves from national history: the general attitude has always been to study topics strictly related to Croatian society and history (with the exception of some studies covering Croatian immigration to the U.S). Such a trend was spread all along the Twentieth century and still stands: even if US soft power brought to Croatia many signs of "Americanization," historians' interest remains focused on their national boundaries.

Marcin Fatafski (Jagiellonian University, Krakow), "From Politicized Historiography to Pluralistic Debate? Studies on US history in Poland after the Second World War"

- 9 Polish fascination for the United States did not influence Polish historiography of the US According to Marcin Fatafski, the historical discourse on the United States in Poland was influenced by two main factors. First, postwar historiography of the United States reflected the political situation of the country, therefore historians looked to the US for examples of social progress and political and economic development and for evidence that US history was somehow in line with the Marxist general vision of development. As a result, the New Deal was a great fascination and the scholarship published on the Presidency tended to present Democratic presidents in a better way than Republicans. Second, Polish historiography was (and still is) very factual, conservative, and mainstream: it does not investigate society or culture, it neglects some new trends in American studies abroad (such as gender, or minorities), and it mainly focuses on foreign policy and bilateral relations. In 1990 new trends paved the way for the opening of new American studies programs, and in recent times several historians have been

trying to present US history as a complex process, in order to show the various factors that influence it and the relations between the two countries.

Dag Blanck (Uppsala University), "The Significance of Location: Practicing American History in Sweden"

- 10 Even though Swedish society has always felt a strong connection with the US, historians' interest did not follow the same path (Runblom, 1985, 390). According to Dag Blanck, within Swedish historiography of the US, location matters a lot because the topics are Sweden-centered (emigration, Swedish immigration to the US, and Swedish-US relations), but it matters less with regards to method and theory. As in the Croatian case, there has been a widespread reluctance among Swedish historians to study non-Swedish history and much attention was paid to the immigration flows between the two countries. On the contrary, in terms of method and theory, Blanck suggested that Swedish historians are quite influenced by international tendencies (as with the cultural and linguistic turns in US historiography), so that both in terms of method and theory, there are opportunities for exchange with other European scholars.

Paul Schor (University of Paris VII Denis Diderot), "French Historians and the History of the State and Society in the United States"

- 11 In his speech, Paul Schor analyzed the meaning of place when writing history from a French perspective. In his opinion, writing from the outside of a given context is always a way of making a comparison without saying it, because the public is different and the writer – the historian – has to deal with it. Until recent times, French historians of the US were first trained as historians of France, and later turned to the United States as their field of inquiry (Edling, 2014). Given that, from the institutional point of view, there were no historians of the US strictly speaking, Dr. Schor agreed with Silvy Hilton in arguing that the US is often studied from different perspectives (mainly legal or political), and that most of the times historians of the United States belong to other departments than History. However, in the French case location is even more relevant when looking at the topics chosen by scholars, which are generally oriented to the interests of the readers. In particular, close to the turn of the century, race, immigration, and ethnic studies were part of the public discourse in France, both producing attractions and aversions towards the United States. Similarly, when in the 1990s historians turned to sociology and theory of the French State with less ideology and more interest in bureaucracy, the trend was reflected in the area of US history, opening the workshop's debate on whether it might be possible to launch a research on a European topic regardless of the interests of the specific national public.

Ferdinando Fasce (University of Genoa), "Fifty Years On. Italian Historians of the United States and Italian History, Culture and Public Life. 1960-2010"

- 12 The detailed work presented by Ferdinando Fasce about the Italian historiography of the US introduced a set of themes and questions strongly related to location. The first point concerned the professional profile of Italian Americanists that, during the Cold War, changed from "cultural brokers" to "scholars in between," raising the quantity and quality of their connections and exchanges across the Atlantic. The second is the irony of such a new role: Italian historians of the US have engaged in the international debate but they do not seem able to engage in the same kind of debate in Italy. The third issue presented by Fasce was Italian Americanists' unfailing interest in the relational fields (migration, bilateral/international relations) and their profound reshaping according to the changing nature of the audience and the complex relations of Italian Americanists with their public. Finally, Fasce left on the table a few questions related to the position of the US: What is the role of US history within the general Italian historiographical community? What is the image of the US that emerges from it? Is the US still relevant for the understanding of Europe?

Roundtable and concluding remarks "European Historians of the United States, European-Wide Views of the American Past, and European History, Culture and Public Life"

- 13 Alexander Etkind, Federico Romero, Edoardo Tortarolo and Tibor Frank contributed to the roundtable with their remarks on the status of the discipline in Europe and on future perspectives.
- 14 According to some of the participants, it is difficult to claim that there is a European historiography of the United States because historical events (regional, national, European, Atlantic, world history) have influenced scholarly approaches (e.g. Cold War, national movements, etc.). When looking at macro historiographical areas, Europe seems divided into three main groups. Western, Northern and Eastern countries developed different trends and approaches to general history and to the history of the US. Nonetheless, except for Britain, in all three groups of countries, the discipline has generally been reshaped in response to the cultural needs of new and different audiences. Moreover, the concepts that we use carry different meanings and connotations that change the way scholars mediate/translate/connect the focuses of their scholarship. In many cases, concepts (e.g. middle class, race, unions) really need to be located in order for the writer/historian as well as for the reader/public to understand their meaning.
- 15 Finally, professional location and identity really depend on institutional issues on the regional or national level: universities, departments, schools, language, denomination of the courses/teachings, funding, teaching jobs, student demands and marketability of the job are "going European" (and, to some extent, even American), but still rely on local dynamics. Ironically, what is shared by the whole group (UK excepted), are the

pessimistic prophecies about the future of American studies and of the history of the United States. Considering that such studies are often re-directed or not properly supported, most of the participants agreed to the necessity to re-think the field and its future goals.

- 16 Nonetheless, the effort to look at Europe as a place where the US is seen in a complex, yet comprehensive, perspective seems appropriate. The Europeanization of the historiography of the United States does not preclude local approaches: there is a tension between the European varieties of the field and the efforts to mix, match, put in common issues, questions, points of view. This "Europeanist effort" does not amount to homogenization, but it is rather an attempt to build the cartography of the EU's Americanist varieties and to see where it is possible to find common approaches. In short, US historiography in Europe is just as diverse as Europe itself.

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